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CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT New Weapon

ROGER MUDD: A different game of espionage is played here in Washington, and the Soviets have a powerful new weapon in the game, a weapon our government may have difficulty matching.

Robert Hager has the story.

ROBERT HAGER: Some U.S. agents call this an intelligence giveaway, allowing the Soviets to build their new Washington Embassy on a 350-foot hill called Mount Alto, ideal for intercepting telephone calls and data.

Former CIA Director Stansfield Turner:

STANSFIELD TURNER: I think we got a bad deal. For some reason, a long time ago, we gave them the right to build an embassy on a very high piece of ground in Washington, D.C. We're put into a hollow with our new embassy in Moscow.

HAGER: With most telephone calls and a lot of data now beamed from tower-to-tower, a line of sight to the source is what's important. From rooftops on Mount Alto, there's a line of sight to four of AT&T's busiest towers, and to the Pentagon, to the State Department, and the U.S. Capitol.

Writer and intelligence expert James Bamford:

JAMES BAMFORD: It's a very key cross-section of microwave channels that carry a lot of important defense and government communications.

HAGER: The new embassy is located here. The Pentagon is believed to beam telex messages right by it to a tower here

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for retransmission. Another tower, here, is believed to retransmit missile tracking data to a government space office, here. And intelligence information is also beamed to a major naval intelligence center only one mile from the embassy.

New York Senator Daniel Moynihan says the Soviets have always sought high ground for their diplomatic buildings.

SENATOR DANIEL MOYNIHAN: One is in New York City, up in Riverdale in the Bronx, which is a communications tower. It's about a 25-story apartment building just stuffed with listening devices.

HAGER: And a Soviet vacation retreat on Long Island. Defected Russian diplomat Arkady Shevchenko remembers it.

ARKADY SHEVCHENKO: The whole floor and the attic is actually all this heavy, sophisticated equipment.

I repeat again, I'm not a professional, but I know there is a lot of sophisticated equipment there.

HAGER: As for the new embassy in Washington:

SHEVCHENKO: Oh, yes. They would do the same thing, but on a larger scale.

HAGER: A few years ago the local telephone company agreed to protect some Pentagon and State Department lines by putting them underground. Scrambler telephones would be a better protection. But some say it would take a half-million scrambler phones to do the job.

Meantime, the Soviets will have moved in and begun listening. And there's nothing the government can do to stop them.